

The BP&J Interurban Railroad



Bloomington, Pontiac & Joliet Electric Railway

1902 – 1925

By: Dale C. Maley



Historical Personal Transportation Modes



Route 66

Model T => Autos

Passenger Trains

1st Surveys (Roads)

BP&J

Horses

Native
American

White
Settlers

1830

1850

1870

1890

1910

1930

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

The company is Chartered - 1902

- Chartered December 30, 1902 under Illinois law
- Organized in Pontiac with local capital stock of \$100,000
 - Equivalent to \$3.8 million in today's dollars
- Promoted by Pontiac businessmen led by J. A. Carrithers of Pontiac Light & Water Co.
- Original plan: Interurban line from Bloomington to Joliet

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

The Incorporators:

- J.A. Carrithers – President of Pontiac Light & Water Co.
- Fred L. Lucas – Chief Instigator
- John S. Murphy, Clark E. Legg, A. M. Legg
- William F. VanBuskirk, David S. Myers, Eden M. Johnson, A. C. Folsom (All from Pontiac)

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

1st Board of Directors in 1902

- Carrithers, Murphy, the two Leggs
- Myers, Johnson, McWilliams
- Joseph S. Covey and B. F. Harber

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

Construction Begins – 1904

- Rails laid first from Pontiac through Cayuga to Odell
- Later extended north to Dwight
- Overhead trolley cars operated between Pontiac and Dwight for years
- Line was graded from Pontiac south beyond Chenoa, culverts put in but no rails
 - BP&J stopped at Pontiac, never ran south to Chenoa

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

1st Interurban car arrived in 1905

- Named “The Dwight” arrived Feb. 3, 1905



The BP&J Interurban Railroad

1st Run – March 15, 1905

- 1st regular interurban run made from Pontiac to Odell
- On March 17, Mayor S. A. Rathbun appointed a committee of Alderman
- Over 100 passengers carried on the 1st day
- Average of 200 passengers per day in 1st ten days

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

Pride of the BP&J Fleet

- “The Pontiac” arrived July 19, 1905
- Two similar overhead trolley cars shown below



- Brick road by Historic Courthouse
- Tracks cut-in and below top of brick road
- Still horse and auto traffic

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

Pontiac

Bloomington, Pontiac & Joliet Electric Railway Co.

PONTIAC at an unknown location was built by the American Car Company of St. Louis as a demonstration model in 1904 and was exhibited at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904. It was delivered to the BP&J on July 19, 1905 and later renumbered #202, operating from 1905 until 1925 on the 19-mile line from Pontiac northwest to Dwight.

Caption data from Stephen Scalzo

Bill Volkmer collection



<https://www.newdavesrailpix.com/odds/il/htm/bpj04.htm>

The BP&J Interurban Railroad



"Pontiac" as delivered on July 19, 1905 at the Illinois Central Railroad interchange on the north side of Pontiac near the BP&J car-barn on Aurora Street.

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

The Route through Pontiac:

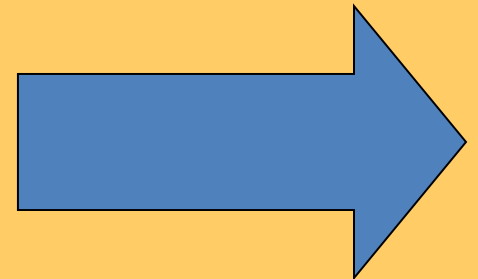
- Main office at 221 W. Washington Street
- Route ran across Interurban bridge east on Washington St.
- Tracks ran north on Main Street past the old high school
- Southern terminus at northwest corner of Boys Reformatory (Later Pontiac Prison)

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

The Historic Interurban Bridge

- The BP&J ran through Pontiac to a turn-around at the Boy's Reformatory
- Bridge crossed the Vermilion river near flood stage

Photo



The BP&J Interurban Railroad

The Historic Interurban Bridge



The BP&J Interurban Railroad

The Summer of 1905

- 29 passenger trains or interurbans stopping in Pontiac daily
- Chicago & Alton operated 13 passenger trains through each day
- Illinois Central had four trains here each day

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

“Bump, Push and Jerk”

- The BP&J became the butt of many jokes
- Acquired nickname from its initials and obvious references to its operation
- Officially: Bloomington, Pontiac & Joliet
- Locals called it: “Bump, Push and Jerk”
- Fun Fact: BP&J never ran to either Bloomington or Joliet even though its name was Bloomington, Pontiac & Joliet

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

Popular Excursions

- Excursions, especially for picnics and Chautauqua events were common
- A dance hall at Interurban Park attracted many persons
- Pontiac vs. Odell baseball games drew whole teams and fans boarding the BP&J cars

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

BP&J Car at Odell



BP&J Car #201 – a key stop along the Pontiac to Dwight route

Thanks to Art Peterson and the Krambles-Peterson Archives

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

The Car Barn Location

- Located on northeast edge of Pontiac near the Illinois Central, Wabash, and Alton Railroads
- Near Spartan foundry, J. P. McMurray Canning Company
- Close to the old coal mine

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

BP&J car navigating Pontiac city streets — July 14, 1905



Thanks to Art Peterson and the Krambles-Peterson Archives

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

Power Plant Disaster – January 1906

- Thursday morning, January 25, 1906 – crankshaft of 500 Hp engine snapped !
- Recent sleet storm caused heavy electrical strain on the system
- Ice and sleet blamed for numerous short circuit problems
- Flywheel twisted in such a manner that it tore the building into pieces.
- 500 Hp electrical generator was powered by a very large steam boiler/engine

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

Complete Shutdown

- Not only railway down, but plant was city's power source
- Nobody had any electricity
- Over \$5,000 damage to equipment and building on Vermilion River
- Luck Break: Westinghouse had identical engine in stock in Pittsburgh

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

Service Restored – February 17, 1906

- Service restored at noon on Saturday, Feb. 17th, 1906
- Was down for ~23 days
- Special car ran in morning for VIPs and invited guests
- Car “Dwight” left Pontiac at 9:10 AM and arrived at Dwight at 9:45 AM
- All along the run, people welcomed the car

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

Tragedy at Odell Crossing in 1907

- Four people killed, dozens injured
- Was Against the Rules for passengers to ride in front vestibule with motorman, but train was full
- Coroner's Inquest
 - Bassin was following lead car too close
 - Unable to stop in time, Bassin also hurt with broken leg and internal injuries

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

Service Disrupted After Wreck

- Both cars had vestibule damage: had to be out of service to repair
- Company only had two cars – not sufficient to handle crowds
- Had contract with post office for mail run
- A steam engine train had to make the mail run, service resumed Tuesday August 7, 1907 using car rented from Illinois Traction System
- Over the life of the line, the BP&J owned **more than two pieces of rolling stock** (two main interurban cars, one city car from 1913, and a steam work engine), but the passenger service most people remembered depended on just those two big interurban cars.

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

The Pontiac Chautauqua Annual Exhibitions

- Chautauqua assemblies held in what is now called Chautauqua Park in southeast Pontiac on the Vermilion River, 1898-1929
- The Wabash Railroad bridge was just east of Chautauqua Park
 - Bridge removed many decades ago.
- Chautauqua's were widely advertised – attracted 10,000+ people some years
- Chautauqua Park became the site of a 2-week temporary town during the annual events

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

Fisher Interests Take Over – November 1907

- November 1907, BP&J sold to Fisher syndicate in Joliet
- New Officers, E. A. Fisher (President), D. S. Myers (VP)
- J. K. Newhall, Secretary, L. Q. Paine, Treasurer, F. E. Fisher – General Manager

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

Expansion Plans to Bloomington

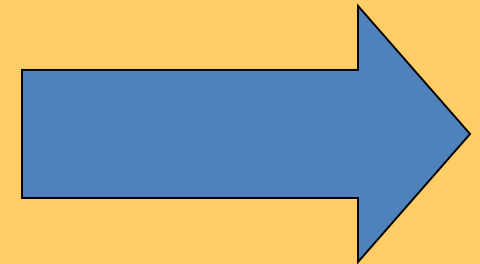
- 1st thing Fishers Wanted was to extend road south to Bloomington
- Public meeting held in Chenoa (10 miles south of Pontiac)
- Extensions to Bloomington and north to Joliet would be conditional
- People of cities along route needed to subscribe to percentage of the bonds needed

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

Company Sold to Larger Interests

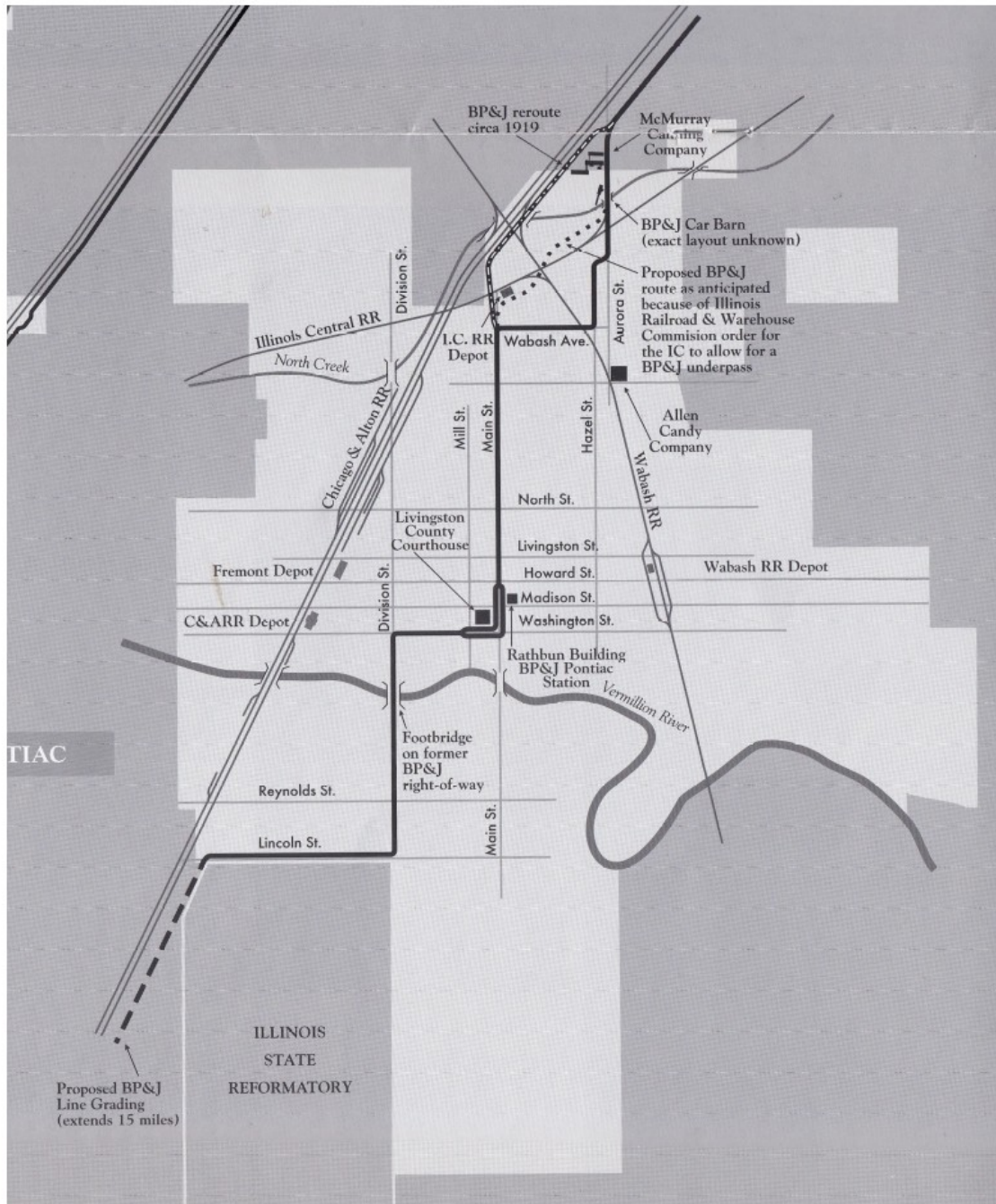
- BP&J sold to Fisher interests in Joliet November 1907
- Sold again, effective March 1, 1913, along with other Pontiac utilities
- Purchased by Public Service Corporation of Chicago
- Sale price understood to be \$750,000
 - Equivalent to \$2.48 million in today's dollars

Route Map



Enlarge by City

The BP&J Interurban Railroad



Bloomington Pontiac & Joliet Railway ———
BP&J reroute circa 1920 - - - - -
BP&J proposed line grading - - - - -
BP&J proposed but never built
Other Railroads ———

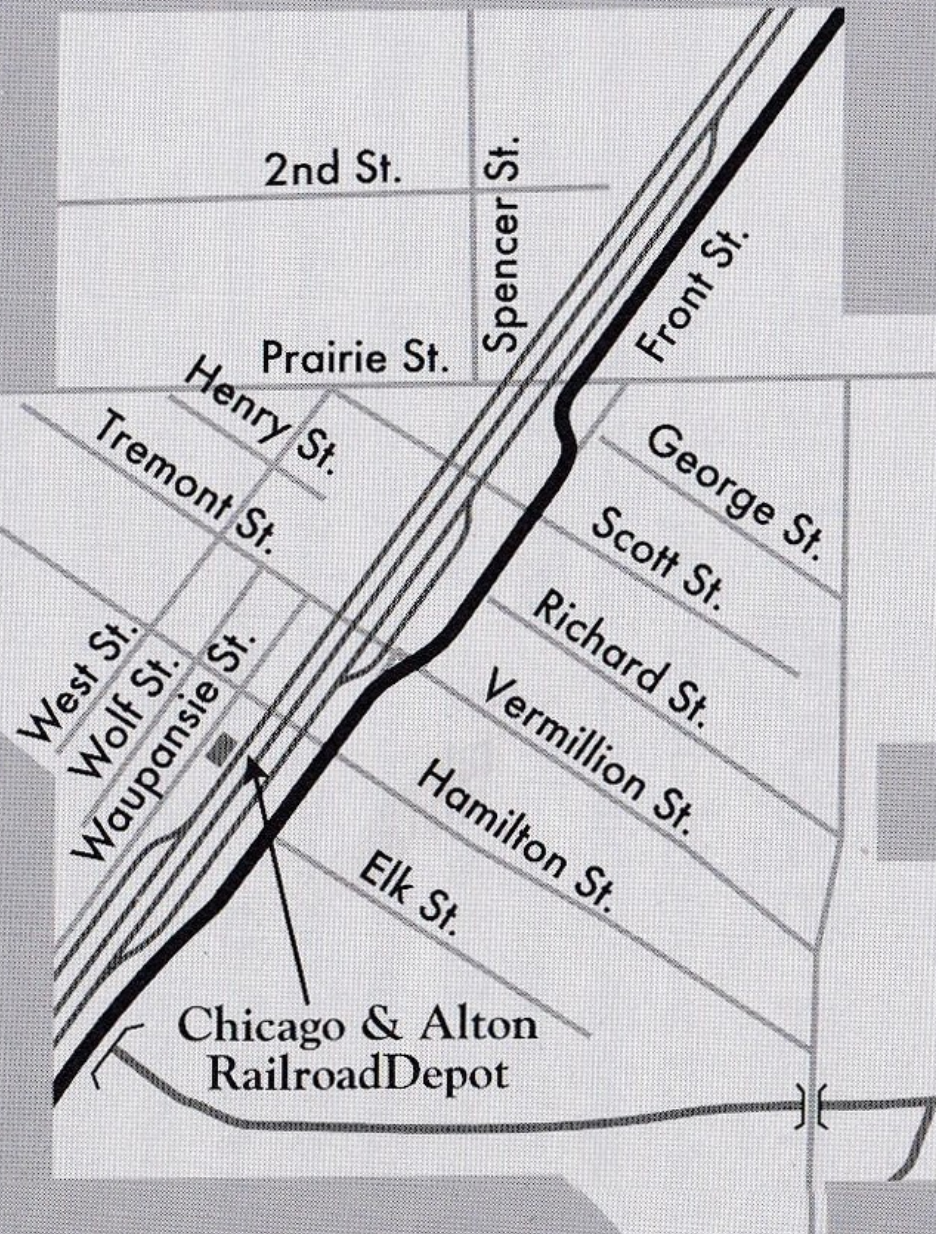
Pontiac

The BP&J Interurban Railroad



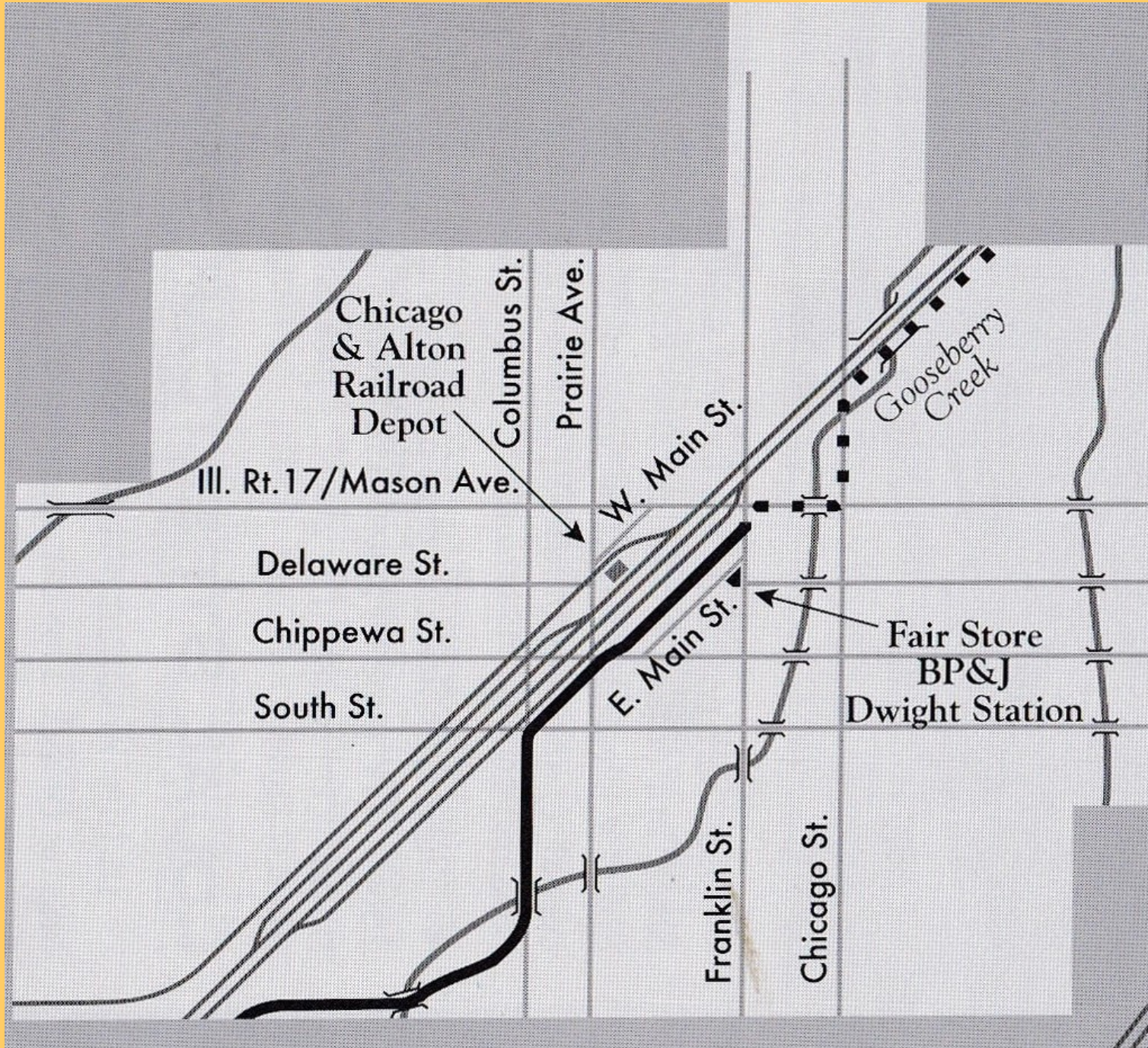
Pontiac

The BP&J Interurban Railroad



Odell

The BP&J Interurban Railroad



Dwight

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

Worst Wreck – August 4, 1907

- Sunday evening at 5:30 PM – two cars collided
- Crowded with people attending ball game and Chautauqua
- Lead car stopped at crossing about one mile south of Odell
- Motorman Bassin claimed brakes failed on second car

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

The Automobile Era Arrives in 1908 with Ford Model T

- Automobiles and buses cut heavily into BP&J passenger traffic
- The BP&J Interurban was finally abandoned in 1925
- In it's 20 years of operation, it was an important factor in lives of area residents

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

The Chenoa Extension — 1909

- Construction to Chenoa started July 1, 1909
- Track completed via Washington Street south
- Company built own right-of-way and single track bridge over the river
- Extension was about 1 mile to prison area

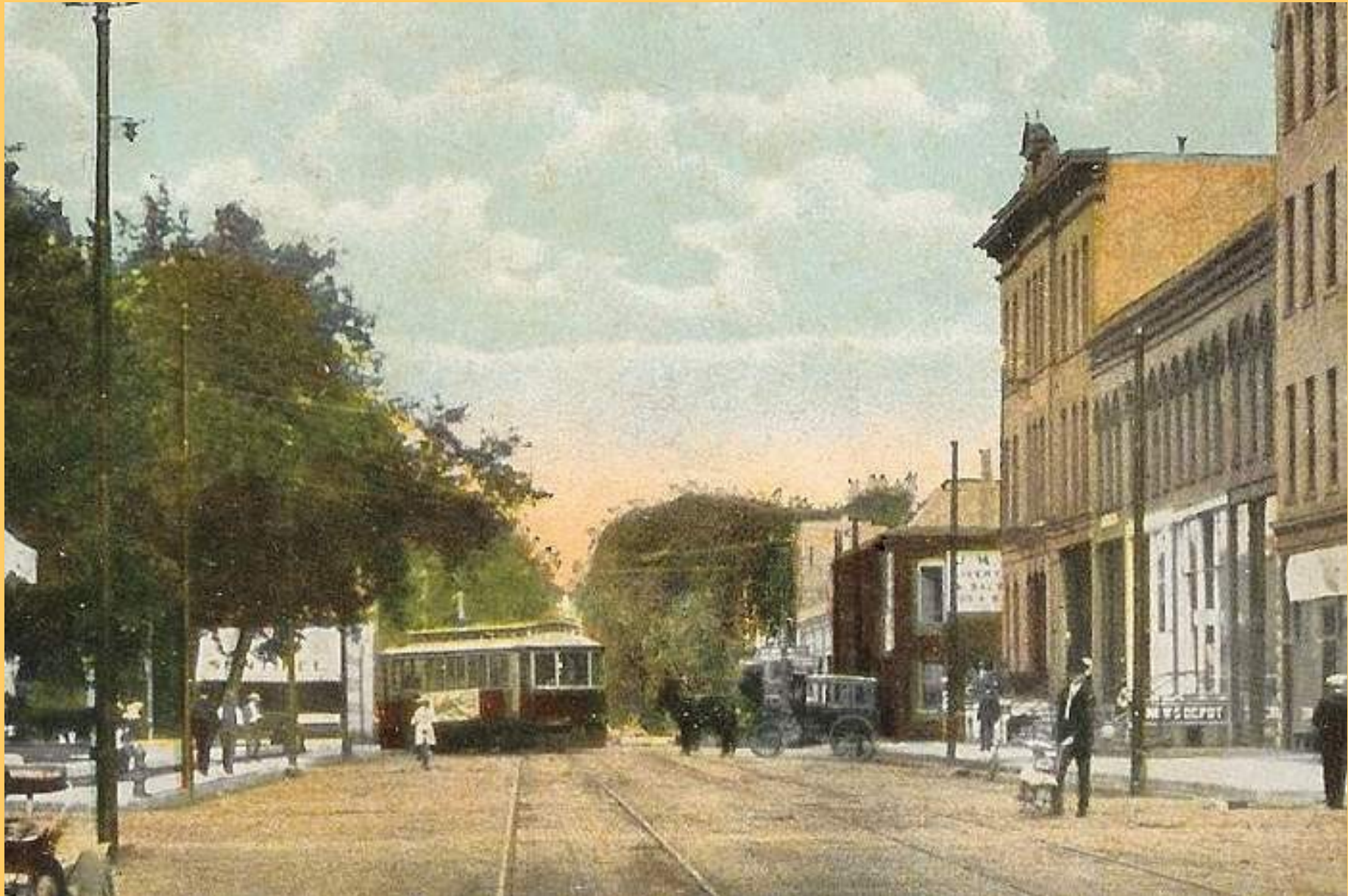
The BP&J Interurban Railroad

Money Runs Out

- Work continued to Chenoa through 1909-1910
- All grading completed along with culverts, bridges, etc
- Ready for installation of rails and overhead wire
- Money ran out —Interurban never completed to Chenoa

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

Mixed Transportation Modes from 1911 Post Card



The BP&J Interurban Railroad

Mixed Transportation Modes in 1910

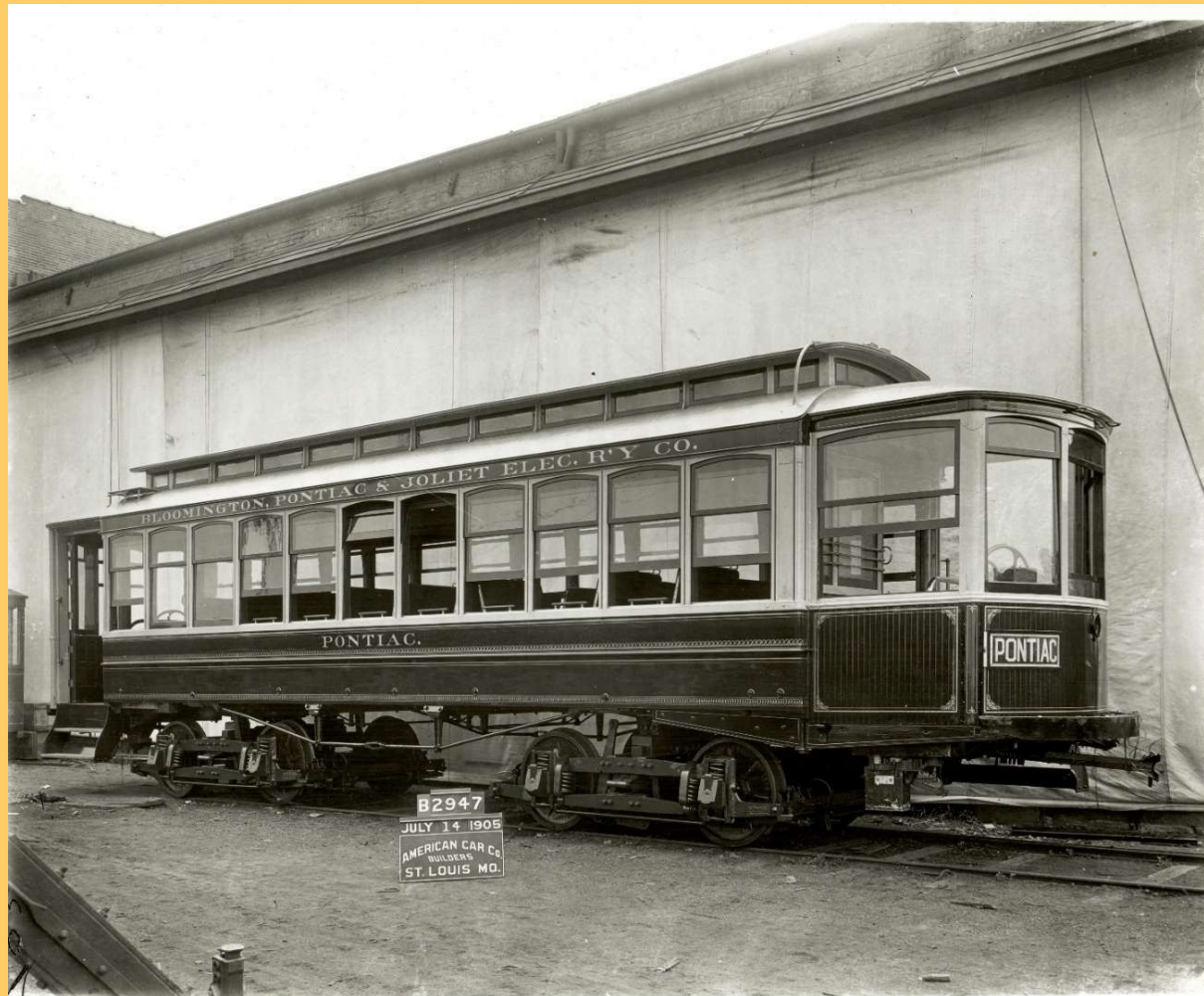


- Horse Drawn Wagon
- 1908 Model T
- BP&J Interurban
- All on same street !!
- Image by Perplexity AI program

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

Car Exterior View

- Exterior view of BP&J car



The BP&J Interurban Railroad

The “Jitney” City Car

- July 1913: secondhand city car purchased in Chicago
- Put in Service August 1, 1913, for local service in Pontiac
- 2-mile run from Prison through business district to car house
- Commonly called “Jitney” because of 5 cent fare

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

The Jitney was Never Profitable

- Taken out of service in winter of 1922
- Best year was 1917, averaged 140 passengers/day
- Last full year 1921, about 60 passengers/day
- Problem: An isolated section with little traffic potential

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

Jitney Passenger Statistics

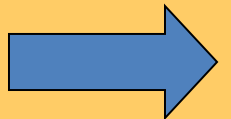
•1916	49,087 passengers
•1917	51,009
•1918	41,500
•1919	35,911
•1920	27,710
•1921	21,084
•1922	13,714 (last year before removed from service)

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

1917 Schedule Details

- Stops included Boy's Reformatory, Pontiac, Nolan, Cayuga, Interurban Park, Odell, Virden, Riling, Dwight
- 8 daily trips in each direction
- 1st morning car made connections with all trains out of Dwight
- Travel time: Approximately 30 minutes from Pontiac to Odell

Interurban Park



The BP&J Interurban Railroad

- Interurban Park was a small company-built amusement spot with a **dance hall and a ballpark**. Buckley notes that the BP&J “built their own park, Interurban Park, just south of Odell at the viaduct; a dance hall here attracted many persons, and the baseball games played here also brought good patronage to the road.”
- So at minimum it had:
 - A dance hall used for social events and draws from the surrounding area.
 - Baseball grounds where games were played, generating excursion traffic for the line.
- It functioned like many interurban-owned parks of the era: a destination specifically designed to create weekend and holiday rider ship.

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

The Great Blizzard of January 1918

- Worst Storm: January 12-13, 1918
- Pontiac completely isolated for 60 hours
- 2-foot drift covered all railroad tracks and highways
- BP&J Electric Railway down for almost a week

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

Interurban Operators – 1922

- A. W. Lehman (motorman) and Charles Anderson (conductor)
- Mrs. Agnes E. Sells was superintendent

Chartered in 1902.

The Bloomington, Pontiac and Joliet Railway company was chartered by the state Dec. 30, 1902, with capital stock of \$100,000.

The incorporators were Carothers, Lucas, John S. Murphy, Clark E. Legg, A. M. Legg, William F. VanBuskirk, David S. Myers, Ed- den M. Johnson and A. C. Folsom, all of Pontiac; J. McWilliams, Jr., Odell; two Lexington men and one Bloomington man.

The first board of directors was composed of Carothers, Murphy, the two Leggs, Myers, Johnson, McWilliams, Joseph S. Corey and B. F. Harber.

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

The Last Run of the BP&J – November 25, 1925

- Mrs. Agnes E. Sells, superintendent, announced the last car would leave Pontiac at 5:15 PM
- Return at 7:30 PM on November 25, 1925
- Interurban employees given other positions with the Public Service company

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

End of the Line

- After the line was dismantled, rails were taken up, and cars burned – November 25, 1925

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

The Legacy Remains

- The patches on Pontiac streets where the tracks were removed were visibly evident for many years after 1925 closure
- The old Interurban bridge stood for many more years
- Flood of July 1951 did wash out portion of the bridge
- The rail era in local transportation gave way to the booming automobile era

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

Important Role in Community

- When started in 1905, few automobiles – dusty paths only roads
- People became accustomed to traveling by train or Interurban
- Interurban could run in most “bad weather” conditions
- BP&J Interurban gave valuable service for ~20 years
- Henry Ford’s Model T was the death knell for the Interurban
 - Every family could afford a car, no need for Interurban



The BP&J Interurban Railroad

Sources and Credits

- James J. Buckley – "Bloomington, Pontiac & Joliet Electric Railway Company" (1982)
- Tom Burke – BP&J historical research materials
- Pontiac Daily Leader – Historical newspaper articles
- Livingston County Historical Society – Archival records
- Historical Photographs:
 - Thanks to Art Peterson and the Krambles-Peterson Archives
 - Livingston County Historical Society Archives
- All materials preserved at [Archive.org](https://archive.org)

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

Miscellaneous Photos

The BP&J Interurban Railroad



By James J. Buckley
Modified and updated by
Tom Burke with additional
research provided by
Stephen M. Scalzo

The Bloomington
Pontiac & Joliet
Electric Railway
Company

“If the ultimate visions and dreams had been realized, the BP&J Electric Railway company would have been part of the Interurban system extending from Chicago to St. Louis”

▲ The crew of the “Pontiac,” later car 202, posed in what we believe is Aurora Street near the car barn in Pontiac. We believe that the motorman is A. W. Lehmann. The conductor is not identified.—Frank E. Butts Collection from Stephen M. Scalzo.

If the ultimate visions and dreams had been realized the Bloomington, Pontiac & Joliet Electric Railway Company (BP&J) would have been part of the interurban system extending from Chicago to St. Louis.

The BP&J Interurban Railroad



◀ Division Street in Pontiac did not cross the Vermillion River, but the BP&J did on the only bridge across the river. As a result the railroad did a brisk local business from residents of south Pontiac who wanted to come into town to shop and people going to the “reformatory” which still is located on the south edge of Pontiac. The opening of the new Vermillion Street bridge, two blocks west of Division St. to automobile traffic in September 1925 affected BP&J’s remaining local traffic, one of the final acts that led to the abandonment of all rail operations on November 25, 1925. In 2004 a suspension bridge carries a pedestrian footpath across the Vermillion River. The bridge is anchored on the BP&J’s bridge abutments.—Jack Sowchin photo

- Modern pedestrian swinging bridge is anchored on the BP&J’s bridge abutments.

The BP&J Interurban Railroad



Dwight – thanks to Art Peterson and the Krambles-Peterson Archives

The BP&J Interurban Railroad



BP&J on the Division Street bridge across the Vermilion.

Thanks to Art Peterson and the Krambles-Peterson Archives

The BP&J Interurban Railroad



- 11/11/1946
Pantagraph
negative
- Interurban car
home of Mr. and
Mrs. Jack Bowers
of Pontiac
- 11/22/1946
Pantagraph story.
- Just moved from
south side to E.
Livingston Street
- No Street
Address

The BP&J Interurban Railroad

Questions ?